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ABSTRACT

Over 80 young adult novels for blacks were analyzed to determine how they revealed the shared experiences of black people in the family setting and the social world (including the world of work). The analyses showed that the authors of these books tended to focus totally on the familial aspects of the shared experiences of black people, a rather narrow focus. Another important finding was that many of the writers were consistently writing about the deplorable ugliness of ghetto life, a view not representative of the whole black community. Although many of the stories introduced social problems, they did not develop the problems to the extent that children would be able to learn from reading about the experiences. It was evident from the study that writers of young adult novels for blacks have an obligation to present youthful readers with sufficient choices upon which to generate goals and values. Children's books that purport to be about black people, especially black adolescents, must portray these shared experiences with authenticity to promote a better understanding of and appreciation for the uniqueness of black people. (Annotations of 25 of the novels studied are reported.) (RL)

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The Black Teenager in Young Adult Novels by Award-Winning Authors

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The Black Teenager in Young Adult Novels by Award-Winning Authors

In a pluralistic society where racial, cultural and social diversities abound, each group eventually develops traditions and special interests. Within each group there is exhibited mutually shared experiences that are unique to and characteristic of people of relatively the same background. It is the sharing of these experiences that provides a cohesiveness, or feeling of togetherness to a particular group. These experiences become crucial or salient to the members of the group as they strive to maintain and preserve that which gives them a sense of worth and self-identification.

Identity and self-esteem of Black children has been the subject of a number of studies. Ward and Braun[1] conducted a study on the self-esteem and racial preference in Black children. This team of researchers used an adaptation of the Clark and Clark doll test, using puppets instead of dolls (one black and one white) to test sixty Black girls and boys between the ages of seven and eight. The group was equally divided between suburban and inner-city school children. The results in no way paralleled that of the Clarks'. Instead, Ward and Braun found that Black children growing up since 1963 rejected the white models in preference for the black models. This lead the researchers to conclude that various social changes, as well as social and political movements (i.e., "Black awareness movement") have been effective in causing these children (who are now 16 and 17 years old) to identify and adopt their own group as acceptable.

Capitalizing on this study and similar ones, the sixties and seventies saw an outpouring of Black-oriented books for children. More and more writers

of fiction and poetry offered to the Black child an alternative to his/her reading fare; also the biographies and information books were well represented. As a result, the market was flooded with "made-to-order" books about Blacks that generated a great deal of controversy particularly among segments of the Black community. The controversy dealt with the invalid image of the "collective experiences" of Black people.

What then are these "collective experiences?" They are what the writer chooses to call the "salient shared experiences." By definition, they are those dominant beliefs, values, cultural and institutional arrangements, that are shared by the majority of the Black population. These institutional arrangements include: the family, the social world and the world of work.

An examination of sociological research reports reflecting the "salient shared experiences" of Black people in the United States, reveals that the study of Black family life has received extensive attention from social scientists and accounts for the volumes of work done in this area. The social world of Black people was examined next and found to be divided into two sub-groups: Interim Institutional Arrangements (Formal Groups) and Leisure-Time Activities (Informal Groups).

The "Black Church" is the second most important institution in the Black community. It is a formal arrangement and second in importance only to the family. Leisure-Time Activities, which are informal arrangements consist of: "the Street," or "the Block," (which is a social institution frequented by people at all ages) and group socialization.

Probably the activity that Blacks participate in most readily is work, because work is a major indication of one's well being, status and future outlook and constitutes those activities people engage in to make a living.

Hence the third in the category of institutional arrangements is the world of work.

Against this backdrop, the writer carefully extracted statements and phrases from sociological studies that revealed salient shared experiences of Black people in the family setting and the social world (to include the world of work) and placed them in "direction" categories (favorable, unfavorable and neutral). The purpose was to analyze the effects these experiences had on the protagonist as reflected in the fictional accounts.

The books for analysis had to meet the following criteria:

1. They were limited to those that were classified as contemporary realistic fiction written for young people of approximately twelve to sixteen years of age.

2. Consideration was limited to fiction bearing a publication date between 1964 and 1979, with the former date being an important date in the history of Black people (i.e. the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.). No poetry, drama, historical fiction, fantasy, biographies, of factual books were used in the study.

3. The protagonist had to be Black and the main action of the story had to focus on Black people.

4. Only those books that had received significant literary awards or were written by authors who had received such awards in the past years (before 1964) for books about Black people were considered.

5. The action in these stories had to take place in contemporary times. This action should have paralleled the publication date but not have preceded the last twenty-five years.

6. Text of the stories were used to gather the data. Illustrations were not considered as a means for gathering data.

Over eighty titles met the first five criteria with only 35 receiving significant literary awards or having been written by award-winning authors who had previously written books about Black people in the United States.

The annotations that follow are representative of how the Black teenager is depicted in young adult novels by award-winning authors.

Bonham, Frank. Durango Street. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1965. Rufus Henry has only been released from the forestry camp two days when he finds himself in trouble with the Gassers, an organized fighting gang. He has been warned by his parole officer to stay out of trouble and away from gangs, but Rufus knows that the only way to survive in the Durango Housing Project is to join a gang. He moves on to become headman of the Moors. Fighting gangs are the central focus of this story.

_____. Mystery of the Fat Cat. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1968. When fire destroys the Dogtown Boys Club, Buddy Williams and three of his friends look toward the inheritance that will come to the Boys Club as a resource for rebuilding the club. This inheritance can only be collected after the death of a rich, fat cat. They begin to put together evidence that will prove that the fat cat is dead and has been replaced by another cat. Adventures abound. Many references to family unity are made as well as references to leisure-time activities for youth.

_____. The Nitty Gritty. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1968. The hopes and dreams of Charlie Matthews go unnoticed by his mother and father, but not by his teacher, Mr. Toia. Frequent visits by his Uncle Baron are always well received by Charlie who plans to travel with his uncle the next time he come to visit the family. Family and kinship bonds are highlighted in this story.

_____. Cool Cat. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1971. The teenager and the world of work are the focus of this story as Buddy Williams and his friends initiate a hauling service to earn extra money. Organized gang behavior is highlighted in this story but not towards violence.

_____. Hey, Big Spender! New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1972. Cook Hankins is selected by Breathing Man to distribute a half-million dollars to needy people in the community. One adventure leads to another as Cool goes about his appointed task. References made to family life and the world of work in this story.

_____. The Golden Bees of Tulami. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1974. Cool Hankins, a high school senior and city boxing champion is being pressured by Turk Ransom, the leader of nine Dogtown gangs to join up. Cool is against joining gangs as well as fearful of the powerful Turks. A handsome African on a mysterious mission with a hive of golden bees, steps in just when all seems lost. Aside from organized gang behavior, kinship bonds are evidenced in this story.

Graham, Lorenz. North Town. New York: Thomas Crowell, Company, 1965. David Williams and his family move to North Town from the south after several upleasant experiences with prejudice and violence. They find that the differences are not that great in the north. This is a very

moving story of family life and the world of work as David becomes head of the house during the prolonged illness of his father.

_____. Whose Town? New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969.
Racial tension is the theme of this story as David Williams and his friends are attacked by a group of young white boys at a carry-out restaurant. Family strength and unity are highlighted in the story.

_____. Return to South Town. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976.
This novel rounds out the two above and the earlier one, South Town (Follett, 1958). It is the powerful story of David Williams and his return to the community that he left as a teenager.

Greenfield, Eloise. Sister. Thomas Crowell Company, 1974.
This novel embraces many aspects of the human experience - life, death, love, laughter and sadness. All of these are carefully documented by thirteen year old Doretha (or "Sister" as she is known to the family) in a book she calls her "Doretha Book" as she observes her older sister withdraw from the family following the death of the father. Family strength and kinship bonds are present in this story.

Guy, Rosa. The Friends. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973.
Fourteen year-old Phyllisia Cathy has just moved to Harlem from the West Indies. Her adjustment to school is slow, coupled with the problems of coping with her strict father. She is befriended at school by Edith Jackson, a very slovent and unkept girl. At first Phyl refuses Edith's friendship, but eventually she comes to rely on it. Family problems are highlighted in this story. The later sequel to this book, Edith Jackson (Viking, 1978) is a moving story of a Black teenager who tried to keep her family together after the death of their parents.

Hamilton, Virginia. M. C. Higgins, the Great. New York: Macmillian Co., 1974.
Family life is the theme of this story as an Ohio hill boy tries to come to a decision about the future of his family and their home. Family unity is stressed throughout the story with an unusual relationship existing between father and son.

_____. The House of Dies Drear. New York: Macmillan Co., 1968.
Thomas Small's father has a college teaching position in a town in Ohio and has bought an old house that once served as an Underground Railroad Station. Set in contemporary times, this is a suspenseful story of the Small family and their experiences in Dies Drear's old house. The Black church receives attention in the story together with emphasis on the strong family ties.

_____. The Planet of Junior Brown. New York: Macmillan Co., 1971.
The major theme of this story is survival. Buddy, a "street child," befriends obese Junior Brown. After several traumatic experiences with his mother and his piano teacher, Junior collapses. It is at this point that Buddy takes him to one of his "planets," an underground hideout for homeless children. The message is friendship and brotherhood and although the boys are Black, the author does not give the story a racial overtone. The "street" is highlighted in this story as unwanted and misunderstood children band together to help each other.

_____. Zeely. New York: Macmillan Company, 1967.
Elizabeth "Geeder" Perry and her brother spend the summer on their uncle's farm. It is when Geeder finds a photograph of a Watusi queen in an old magazine that she is decidedly sure that Zeely Tayber, the girl on the next farm is a direct descendant of this queen. This is the story of how Geeder is brought face-to-face with her African heritage.

Hunter, Kristin. Guests in the Promised Land. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973. A collection of eleven short stories that tell of the experiences of Black teenagers and the way they cope with their environment. The stories run the gamut from domineering mothers to rival street gangs.

_____. The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968. Louretta Hawkins is torn between militancy and moderation in this story of Black life in the ghetto and the effect it has on the youth. Pride in heritage, gang behavior, family life, and the church are highlighted in this story.

Jordan, June, His Own Where. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971.
The focus of this story is on the universal experience of being in love. Buddy. sixteen, and Angela, fourteen, are in love. They turn their backs on society and begin to live their lives together in an abandoned house in the cemetary. A few references are made about kin share responsibility for child-rearing as Buddy finds himself on his own with his mother gone and his father hospitalized.

Lipsyte, Robert. The Contender. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. 1967. Alfred Brooks is a high school drop-out who has to make a decision between going straight or joining a gang. He lives with his aunt and his cousins in a Harlem apartment and works in a grocery store. This is a story of identity and survival and how nonconjugal members aided Alfred in making his decision. Visiting kin frequently is stressed in this story as Alfred, his cousins and his aunt visit an aunt in Queens on a regular basis.

Mathis, Sharon Bell. Listen for the Fig Tree. New York: The Viking Press, 1974. This is a family story that centers around Marvina Johnson, a Black sixteen year-old blind girl, and her widowed mother. The story takes place during the Christmas holidays which marks the year-old murder of Marvina's father. Her mother turns to drinking in her grief and Marvina is torn between remaining home with her mother or attending her first Kwanza, an African harvest celebration. Nonconjugal members are also highlighted in this story.

_____. Teacup Full of Roses. New York: The Viking Press, 1972.
This is a family story about three brothers: Joe, Davey, and Paul. Joe, the middle son is emotionally the strongest. He dropped out of school to help Davy the youngest to get through high school and on to college. Davey is the youngest brother. He is smart and good at basketball. Paul, the oldest of the three boys, has just been released from the hospital after nearly dying from an overdose of drugs. Of the three boys, Paul is the mother's favorite. She makes no pretense about it as the events of the story unfold. An elderly aunt and an invalid father complete the composition of the household.

Myers, Walter Dean. Fast Sam, Cool Clyde and Stuff. New York: The Viking Press, 1974. Francis "Stuff" Williams, who is now eighteen, tells about the time when his family first moved to 116th Street. In this story, he recalls the friendships he made, the adolescent joys and grief, the "hanging around" on the steps or at the club and his coming of age during the five years he lived in Harlem. The story tells of the teenage life styles of these Harlem youngsters as well as the families.

_____. Mojo and the Russians. New York: Viking Press, 1977. Dean Accidentally knocks Drusilla down while having a bicycle race with Kitty. Drusilla, a Mojo lady, vows to get the person responsible. Convinced that he has a boodoo spell on him, the gang devises a plan to "unfix" Dean from the spell placed on him by Drusilla. A humorous story that brings together teenagers bent on helping each other.

_____. The Young Landlords. New York: The Viking Press, 1979. This light-hearted story features the same teenagers from the other Myers' books. The new addition to the gang is Paul. The story is based on the acquisition of a slum building by the gang and their efforts at restoring it. An excellent example of nonviolent gang behavior.

Rodman, Bella. Lions in the Way. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1966. Eight Black students enroll in previously all white Fayette High School. The story is about the week-long events that changed the entire composition of the community. Although the main focus is on segregation in education, references are made to the families of the Black students as well as the Black church.

The implications of the findings and conclusions of this study indicate that writers of children's contemporary realistic fiction about Black people in the United States for the most part are serving as "reporters" on the aspects of the salient shared experiences of Black people as they "see" them. Basically, the authors are saying that all people regardless of their race, national origin or ethnic affiliation have no distinctions in their experiences. The Black experience is not as simplistic as that. The Black experience expands the world of experiences which in many ways influences our experiences in the United States. Black people have a whole normative world and as such should be represented this way in the literature about Black people. The valued and protective attitudes toward kin and others who are not blood related is an example of this. Moreover, there is considerable flexibility in the roles assumed and the emphasis is on the importance of the role rather than upon who performs it.

These examples of salient shared experiences and others should be portrayed in a way that the reader will recognize them as a source of cultural diversity that accounts for the greatness of our society.

Many of the authors of the stories tended to focus totally on the familial aspects of the salient shared experiences of Black people in this study. The Black family is a very important institution in the Black community, but Black people do not just exist in the family.

Another important finding was that many of the writers are consistently writing about the deplorable, ugliness of ghetto life. What is implied here is that more writers need to present both sides of the issue, thereby presenting the "big picture," which would not result in "blaming the victim." Writer Frank Bonham, who had the largest number of titles represented in the study, is not presenting a resource where the Black child can see himself and his people presented in a positive way. The Bonham books abound with stories on organized gang behavior and fighting gangs, an aspect that is not totally representative of the Black community.

Perhaps the children that Bonham patterns his protagonists after are those that he observed in his work at half-way houses in the Los Angeles-Watts area. Further, he wages an all out war on the Black male in most, if not all, of his stories. They are portrayed as absent fathers, hustlers, or uncles, who are not to be trusted and fathers who show no interest in their children. These stories in no way provide for the Black child good male role models. There is little or no doubt that the popularity or exploitation found in the Bonham books has caused the Black child to read them in search for literature that purports to be like him only to find that this is not the truth but one of the many misrepresentations found in stories about Black people and Black life styles.

Many writers of stories about Black adolescents introduced social problems in their stories, but they did not develop them to the extent that the child would be able to gain from the experience. This was evidenced in A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich, an impressionist novel by Alice Childress. Benji, the protagonist, experiments with drugs and goes through all the manifestations that accompanies it. However, the story ends without a resolution. Perhaps there are no easy solutions to this most difficult problem. Perhaps Mrs. Childress is exercising her iconoclastic approach to the writing of fiction for teenage readers, by presenting this open-ended story and thereby forcing the readers to come to grips with their own set of values. In either case, writers have an obligation to present to the youthful reader sufficient choices upon which to generate goals and values.

One book in the study that provided a good model for teenage boys, because of its duality of purpose, is The Contender by Robert Lipsyte. The book seeks to provide a source of identity for adolescent boys, while at the same time addressing itself to the specific problems of being Black and adolescent in a society where things and people are defined in certain ways.

Finally, to say that the stories highlighted here all failed to authentically portray those aspects of the salient shared experiences of Black people would be a grave injustice. The major categories referred to earlier in the discussion (i.e. the family, the social world and the world of work) were presented to some degree in most of the stories. Over half of the stories were more detailed in their portrayals of the salient shared experiences. These stories showed such aspects as:

-Families that were nuclear, extended and augmented where children were "absorbed" or informally adopted.

-Kin share responsibility for child-care and child-rearing practices exhibited by uncles and aunts (maternal and paternal).

-Non-conjugal members (be they relatives or friends) available to retain and insure the survival of the family through financial and/or emotional support.

-High achievement orientation for children as typical attitudes of parents and/or significant others.

-Teenagers participating habitually in loose, fluid, shifting bands, lacking regular leaders, well-defined membership and clear-cut organization.

-The world of work restricted to the Black adult community where the Black youth is usually unemployed or underemployed.

-Involvement in the world of work replacing other social and recreational activities for Black adults and subsequently the youth.

The aspects above are representative of what the sociological research reports have found to be experiences that are salient and shared by most Black people. Absent proportionately from these stories was the prominent role of the church in the Black community together with mutual aid and fraternal organizations. The latter, also known as "lodges," are not as popular as they once were, but still hold a role of prominence in some rural and urban cities. Hence there were noticeable gaps in the stories as the major focus centered around the protagonists existing exclusively in the family with only fleeting attention given to other areas of Black life style.

Children's books that purport to be about Black people and, more specifically, Black adolescents must portray these shared experiences as a whole with authenticity. This is a must, because in addition to helping the Black child build an image of self and group in a positive manner, this literature will also serve as a vehicle for conveying accurate information to the non-Black child about the struggles of people whose racial and cultural differences and backgrounds account for the uniqueness of their experiences

Non-Black children will receive information that will enable them to empathize with people whose culture and heritage are different from their own,

while at the same time promoting a better understanding of and appreciation for the uniqueness of Black people that manifests itself both culturally and historically. Award-winning books enjoy a wide distribution across the country and without a doubt must be held accountable.

FOOTNOTE

1. Susan H. Ward and John Braun, "Self-Esteem and Racial Preference in Black Children," American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 42:644-647, July, 1972.